



The center panel from a three mural set, painted by Depression-era artist Lucile Lloyd on the theme of "California's Name." The murals, dedicated in 1937 in the California State Building in Los Angeles, currently reside in the "California Room" of the State Capitol.

## Origin and Meaning of the Name California

Numerous theories exist as to the origin and meaning of the word "California." All that is known for certain is that someone, presumably a Spanish navigator, applied the name to the territory that now comprises the State of California sometime before the year 1541. It is probable that either Ortuno Ximenez (1533) or Hernando Cortés (1535) christened California, and that the name was perpetuated by word of mouth until it was definitely established as a geographical location on a map in 1541.

The etymology of the word California is also uncertain.<sup>1</sup> Some writers have attributed the name to a combination of the Latin words *calida* and *fornax*, "a hot furnace." General Mariano G. Vallejo and his nephew, Juan B. Alvarado, one of the Governors when California was a territory of Mexico, maintained that the word evolved from the Lower California Native American term *kali forno*, meaning "high hill" or "native land."

The most acceptable theory, however, is the one presented by the Rev. Edward Everett Hale, who, in 1862, discovered the name "California" in a romantic novel *Las Sergas de Esplandian* (The Deeds of Esplandian) by Garcia Ordóñez de Montalvo. This novel was first published early in the 16th century. Hale points out that it is likely that the Spanish adventurers were familiar with the then popular novel. The name first appears in the following passage:

"\* \* \* Know, then, that, on the right hand of the Indies, there is an island called California, very close to the side of the Terrestrial Paradise, and it was peopled by black women, without any man among them, \* \* \* Their island was the strongest in all the world, with its steep cliffs and rocky shores. Their arms were all of gold, \* \* \* For, in the whole island there was no metal but gold."<sup>2</sup>

At the time of the explorations of Ximenez and Cortés, it was believed that California was an island; and, sailing up the west side of Mexico, these explorers thought they were at the exact site of de Montalvo's California, "on the right hand of the Indies."

Although Mr. Hale could not furnish the etymology for the word, in recent years P. Boissonade, a French investigator, has shed some light upon its origin.<sup>3</sup> Boissonade points out that a city, Califerne, is mentioned in the *Chanson de Roland* (Song of Roland), a French epic poem of the 11th century. This, he believes is the source of

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the origin and meaning of the name of California, see Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names*, pp. 50-51, and *California Blue Book*, 1958, p. 651, where Gudde states that, in 1849, George Ticknor found the name California in the Spanish romance *Las Sergas de Esplandian*.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Everett Hale, *The Queen of California*, p. 15. In this work Mr. Hale discusses other theories concerning the origin and meaning of the word California, and furnishes a translation of those passages from Montalvo's work which relate to the mythical California.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Boissonade's work, see Rockwell D. Hunt and Nellie Van De Grift Sanchez, *A Short History of California*, pp. 35-38.

de Montalvo's more Spanish version "California." He points out that Califerne was the capital of Barbary in North Africa, a city so ancient that even in the 11th century its origin was attributed to giants. He suggests that Califerne stems from two Berber-Arabic words *kalaa*, a fortified city, and *iferne* or *ifrene*, its principal citizens, hence a capital city.